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THE REPORT OF A MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION-SPONSORED CONFERENCE ON CHILDHOOD AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING (MAY 5-6, 1956) SUMMARIZES THE DISCUSSIONS. THE TOPICS INCLUDE (1) HOW CHILDREN NORMALLY LEARN THEIR MOTHER TONGUE, (2) IMITATION AND ANALYSIS IN THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS, (3) RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE LEARNING OF A FIRST AND A SECOND LANGUAGE, (4) THE ORDER OF THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE SKILLS, (5) OPTIMUM AGE FOR BEGINNING THE LEARNING OF A SECOND LANGUAGE (BETWEEN AGES 4 AND 8), AND (6) THE BEST PRINTED SOURCES ON THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS. PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED FRANCES L. ILG, W.F. LEOPOLD, WILDER PENFIELD, JOSEPH KAVETSKY, FILOMENA PELORO, LAMAR ROBERTS, A.S. VAUGHN-THOMAS, AND URIEL WEINREICH. A STATEMENT BY ARNOLD GESELL AND FRANCES L. ILG ON DEVELOPMENTAL TRENDS IN LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR IS INCLUDED. (AF)

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CHILDHOOD AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

On 5 and 6 May 1956 the persons listed below met on the invitation of the MLA to discuss some of the basic issues involved in the learning of a second language, particularly during childhood. They brought to the discussion, which we shall try to synthesize in the following report, a variety of knowledge and experience. In addition, Dr. Penfield, in response to questions by the conferees, drafted the formulation which was incorporated in the consensus statement contained later in this report. It represents a responsible attempt to relate knowledge in the fields of neurology and neuro-surgery to language learning. Finally, Dr. Ilg, in collaboration with Dr. Arnold Gesell, has summarized in the statement concluding this report the relevance of knowledge in the fields of psychology and child development to language learning. We have tried throughout to discover in the specialized knowledge and diverse experience of the conferees possible implications for second language teaching.

Participants

Dr. Frances L. Ilg, Director, Gesell Institute of Child Development; co-author of The First Five Years of Life, Infant and Child in the Culture of Today, The Child from Five to Ten, and Youth: The Years from Ten to Sixteen.

Dr. Joseph Kavetsky, Research Associate, The Puerto Rican Study, NYC.; author of A Guide to the Teaching of English to Puerto Rican Pupils.

Dr. W.F. Leopold, Professor of German and Linguistics, Northwestern Univ.; author of Speech Development of a Bilingual Child, Bibliography of Child Language.

Miss Filomena Peloro, Supervisor of Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools, Hackensack (N.J.) Public Schools.

Dr. Wilder Penfield, Director, Montreal Neurological Institute; author of "A Consideration of the Neurophysiological Mechanisms of Speech and Some Educational Consequences."

Dr. Lamar Roberts, Montreal Neurological Institute.

Mr. A.S. Vaughn-Thomas, Principal, The United Nations International School
Dr. Uriel Weinreich, Assistant Professor of Linguistics and of Yiddish, Columbia Univ.; author of Languages in Contact.

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Part I
Summary of Conference Discussion

1. By what process do children normally learn their mother tongue?

A child has language, ready-made, presented to him, and learns by imitation. His learning is not slavish but selective, but his criteria of selection are not those of an adult, who is therefore often surprised and mystified by what the child selects and rejects from the speech surrounding him. (WL).

During the first year the child first cries (vocal activity without linguistic meaning), then coos (verbal play consisting of vocalic sounds in the back of the mouth and vague consonant sounds), then babbles (verbal play with front sounds and clear consonants), and finally reaches the stage of early imitative speech (which may include some babbling to which the environment has responded). (WL)

The child first learns to understand, then to speak, usually saying his first words around his first birthday. In the second year there are lags of 2 to 7 months from hearing to utterance. By the age of 2 a child is learning words not primarily for their sound but for their meaning. At first he is likely to mutilate the pronunciation, but learns rapidly to refine his speech production until, by the age of 3 or 4, the basic skills of understanding and speaking are roughly perfected. Reading and writing are out of the question in this early stage. (WL, FI)

In the second year of life speech normally consists of one-word sentences. This state usually lasts many months. Then children begin to put 2 words together, then 3. By the end of the second year the 3 basic elements of the simple sentence are differentiated: subject, verb, and object. (WL)

The relation of gestures to speech was discussed, with some diversity of opinion. Some of the conferees considered that speech consists exclusively of the use of the vocal apparatus. (WL) Others considered that gestures are so closely related to speech that both form a part of language as communication. (WP, JK) The place of gesture -- called kinesics -- is receiving special attention by some linguistic scientists since gesture, like speech, is patterned, and the patterns differ from one speech group or community to another.

Dr. Penfield remarked that "When a person through injury to the speech area in the brain loses, for example, the ability to say 'yes' he may also lose the ability to nod his head." The movement of the head to accompany speech apparently has a localization in the brain similar to that for the speech utterance itself. The patient cannot make this signal even though he can use his head properly for other purposes. This suggested the desirability of distinguishing between gestures which communicate and others. Dr. Kavetsky noted that in Puerto Rico teachers use gestures so freely that children often react to gestures rather than words.

Discussing the psychology of early language learning, Dr. Ilg distinguished between 2 general categories of language learners: the imitative and the creative. The first group learns more rapidly and with less baby talk or jargon. Girls are more likely than boys to belong to this group of rapid and accurate learners. The creative learner may be slower to learn, may take longer to put words together, indulges in play with sounds which results in variations of pronunciation and elaboration of jargon. Such children may invent a stream of vocal noises that sound like real speech but are not, create their own words and meanings.

The poets are likely to come from this group.

Dr. Penfield reminded the conferees that language learning takes place according to the principle of the conditioned reflex, that is, one learns to respond similarly to similar stimuli in the environment. Since language is thus associated with environment, it seems plausible to assume that a child will respond best to constant stimuli. This does not mean that a child cannot respond readily to stimuli in more than one language, but it does suggest that each language should perhaps be identified with one or more persons and one or more specific environments. As an example, Dr. Penfield mentioned the fact that his children had learned German in the nursery, French in school, and English in the family.

In addition to the general differences between the imitative and the creative learners of language, Dr. Ilg called attention to great individual differences that exist among children with respect to language learning. Not only do individuals differ greatly, but sibling order, that is, a child's relation to older or younger brothers and sisters, can make a difference.

Our two neurologists agreed that a young child that has learned to speak and has lost this power because of a brain injury will after a year or so of silence begin to speak again and will learn to speak normally. Dr. Roberts cited "quite clear cases of injury at the age of 8 where there is complete recovery." He also mentioned another case, that of an adult, in which the patient learned to speak only a few words. The implication seems clear: the early plasticity of the brain for language learning must gradually disappear.

In addition to differences between individuals and siblings, Dr. Ilg hypothesized that there might be differences between nationalities. It is possible, she thought, that Latin children learn their first language faster and their second language more slowly than Anglo-Saxon children, though evidence on this point is insufficient.

2. If language learning by young children is more imitative than analytical, does the process gradually become more analytical with age?

Mr. Vaughan-Thomas and Professor Leopold found no correlation between the ability to imitate an accent accurately and intellectual capacity. The latter went so far as to contend that the pronunciation is the only part of language learning that is chiefly imitative. Mr. Vaughan-Thomas speculated that there may be an age when an accent is learned most easily but when other things are not learned so well.

Dr. Ilg seemed to think that the early years, especially up to the age of 8, are most favorable for imitative learning. "Even at the age of 9 a child gets more analytical in language learning; 9 is a very analytical age."

Professor Leopold observed that a child of 6-8 years of age has completely formed his English speech habits but not so firmly as to interfere with his capacity to learn a second language. Though there was general acquiescence in the proposition that the youthful learner is a better imitator than an older learner, there was no agreement on a specific pattern. Once again the importance of individual differences was underlined. Thus certain person retain a better capacity than others for imitative learning, and generally girls are better in this than boys.

Dr. Penfield pointed out that a child learning his mother tongue acquires a whole set of pronunciation habits. With this set of habits he is equipped to multiply the words in his vocabulary without defects in accent all through life. If the new set of pronunciation habits needed in learning a second language are not learned early enough in the period of cerebral plasticity, the original pronunciation habits of the first language may always prevail. Hence the desirability, according to Dr. Penfield, of going back to the "mother's method" of language teaching.

3. How much of the process involved in learning the first language applies to the learning of a second language?

"You can predict how a child will learn a second language from the way he has learned the first," said Dr. Ilg.

The consensus seemed to be that the learner of a second language, as of a first, would do well to follow the same natural progressions -- hearing, speaking, reading, and writing -- but not necessarily with the same time allowances.

4. Is there a "natural" order in acquiring language skills -- e.g., (a) understanding, (b) speaking, (c) reading, and (d) writing -- which is as applicable to the learning of a second language as to the first?

To the direct question "Since in the learning of the first language understanding precedes speaking, is there any practical application of this fact to the teaching of a second language?" Professor Leopold replied "Yes, although classroom needs may require modification of pure listening periods." No one took exception. Dr. Kavetsky added, "In the first grade we have found that children need a period of understanding before speaking." This applies to Puerto Rican children in New York schools who are learning English. Dr. Ilg supported this contention also by saying, "In languages in general there has to be more understanding than perhaps we allow for now, more time before we expect word mimicry, more time between the aural and oral."

Dr. Ilg would like to see second language experience start with songs at about 4, when the child imitates readily melody and the phonetic pattern of words and when he loves to hear foreign songs. At 5 he likes single words. Then one can begin putting language into use by relating it to concrete objects. At about 6 you can tie simple words together and especially have the children act them out. At 6 the child is the actor in the midst of things. He derives great joy from acting and has great flexibility of body and mind.

5. Is it possible to determine an optimum age, from the standpoint of the child's physiology and psychology, for beginning the learning of a second language?

Several conferees (WP, FI, WL) were inclined to think that ideally the best starting age is at birth. However, since the group was considering language learning in relation to schooling and since the first language is normally "set" by the age of 4 or 5, it was decided to select 4 as the earliest age to be recommended. As it is stated below, the years from 4 to 8 are regarded as very favorable. The imitative capacity of the child of this early period is considered by Dr. Ilg as the best for language learning. She added that at 8 the child is group-minded, expansive, and receptive. At this age, when expansion and imitation are at their height, the child can under favorable conditions be expected to learn a second language with a rush. At 8 also the child begins to hold on to patterns and at 9 he fixes them. (FI)

6. What are the best printed sources of dependable information on the language learning process?

1. Harold B. Dunkel, Second-Language Learning. Boston, Ginn, 1948.

2. Arnold Gesell, Infant Development: The Embryology of Early Human Behavior. New York, Harpers, 1952. (especially pp 59-60)

3. Arnold Gesell and Frances L. Ilg, The Child from Five to Ten. New York, Harpers, 1946. (This volume delineates the maturity traits for the successive age zones from five to ten years. Growth gradients on language pp. 444-449.)

4. Antoine Gregoire, L'apprentissage du langage. Paris, Droz, 1937-1947.

5. Roman Jacobson, Kindersprache, Aphasie und all-germeine Lantgesetze. Uppsala, 1941.

6. W. F. Leopold, Speech Development of a Bilingual Child. 4 vols. Evanston, Ill., Northwestern Univ. Press, 1939-49.

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8. M.M. Lewis, Infant Speech. New York, Humanistic Press London, Routledge and Paul, 1951.

9. Dorothea A. McCarthy, "Language Development in Children," in Manual of Child Psychology, Leonard Carmichael, ed., New York, Wiley, 1954 pp. 476-581.

10. _____, The Language Development of the Pre-School Child. Minneapolis, The Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1930.

11. Ruth W. Metraux, "Speech Profiles of the Pre-School Child, 18 to 54 Months." Reprinted from the Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders, March 1950, vol. 15, pp. 37-53.

12. Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of a Child. New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932.

13. Wilder Penfield, "A consideration of the neurophysiological mechanisms of speech and some educational consequences." Reprinted from Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, vol. 82, No. 5, 1953.

14. William Preyer, The Mind of the Child, 2 vols. New York, Appelton, 1888-1889.

15. Jules Ronjat, Le developpement du langage observé chez un enfant bilingue. Paris, Champion, 1913.

16. Clara and William Stern, Die Kindersprache. Leipzig, 4th ed., 1928.

17. A.F. Watts, The Language and Mental Development of Children. Boston, Heath, 1945.

Part II
Conference Consensus on Optimum Age for Beginning to Learn a Second Language

The optimum age for beginning the continuous learning of a second language seems to fall within the span of ages 4 through 8, with superior performance to be anticipated at ages 8, 9, 10. In this early period the brain seems to have the greatest plasticity and specialized capacity needed for acquiring speech.

The specialized capacity includes the ability to mimic accurately the stream of speech (sounds, rhythm, intonation, stress, etc.) and to learn and manipulate language patterns easily. Support for the conviction that the brain has greater plasticity for speech learning during the first decade of life comes from the fact that, in cases of gross destruction of the cerebral speech areas, return of normal speech occurs much more rapidly and more completely than at a later age.

Part III
Statement by Dr. Arnold Gesell and Dr. Frances L. Ilg: Developmental Trends in Language Behavior

The development of language in the growing child is subject to the mechanisms of maturation. These mechanisms do not function altogether independently of the culture, but they are innate. They represent the net sum of the gene effects operating in a growth cycle.

For this reason age factors, that is, maturity factors, are of special importance in second language learning, to say nothing of the vernacular. The concept of developmental readiness applies with equal force to the motor, the mental, and the emotional or motivational aspects of speech. And since linguistic growth is closely bound up with the unitary growth of the total action system, early language experience has a significant relation to later language experience. The manner and order in which a child acquires speech reflect stages and patterns of neuromuscular maturity. At 4 weeks of age his utterance, apart from crying, is restricted to small, throaty sounds. At 8 weeks he vocalizes single vowel sounds (ah, eh, uh). At 12 weeks he chuckles; at 16 weeks, laughs; at 20 weeks squeals. By 28 weeks he usually is capable of making polysyllabic vowel sounds and a consonantal m-m-m. By the first year he imitates sounds, and has a word or two in his vocabulary. At 15 months he frequently uses a jargon which seems formless but is configured by inflections and rhythms. It has precursor and even predictive characteristics.

The jargon is a developmental matrix for words, which ordinarily begin to multiply in the period from 18 months to 2 years. At 2 years, or soon thereafter, jargon is usually being displaced by three-word sentences. Including the use of pronouns. At three years the child begins to use prepositions and plurals with some facility. Sheer rate of learning new words is at a peak. The three-year-old may be acquiring language at the rate of about 400 new words in 6 months, and from two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half years his total vocabulary nearly doubles.

The ontogenesis of articulate utterance is complex. The correct production of each of the consonant and vowel sounds does not proceed from age to age in gradual advance toward specificity, but shifts with repeated regressions and progressions (Metraux). The mastery of consonants in terms of phonetic placement progresses from labial to glottal to post-dental to labial-dental, that is,

from front to back to middle. Vowel sounds progress from back to front to middle. Maturational, rather than environmental, factors account for such trends.

Words, whether spoken or unspoken, are cultural devices for facilitating the expression and manipulation of meanings. When an infant or child manipulates objects in a meaningful manner, even without overt or inner speech, he may nevertheless be thinking in his own self-absorbed way. But when he wishes to formulate a personal meaning to himself, or to communicate it socially to others, he uses in due course interjections, words, phrases, and sentences. His preverbal and verbal language alike is decisively influenced by the conventions of the culture in which he is bred, but it is nonetheless subject to the laws of development.

The Years from Four to Eight

The years from four through eight are a period of burgeoning in the patterns of language behavior. The series of thumb-nail sketches below suggest the trends of these growth changes. There are great individual differences, but typical trends become apparent when one age level of maturity is compared with another. A working knowledge of the key characteristics at these advancing levels of maturity has a distinct bearing on the methods of optimum teaching both of the native language and the second language.

The basis for the four-year-old's language interest is exemplified in his acquisition of the words "world" and "different". He wants to hear about other children, to know where tney live, to sing their songs. His tongue enjoys the exercise of big words and different sounds. He has a spontaneous, playful attitude toward words, rhymes and jingles -- which furthers his language development.

The five-year-old is more specific in his interests. He wishes to define, to know the meaning of new words as he hears them. He is interested in words in other languages as well as his own. He likes to name objects.

The dramatic interests of the six-year-old allow him to project himself wholeheartedly into the role of a child of another country. When he enacts everyday incidents -- shopping, telephoning, meeting friends--his language learning comes to involve his vigorously developing sense of self, and he becomes more aware of the living reality of a new language. Rapid drive ahead, rather than careful correction, is most important to him.

Seven is a more critical and more skeptical age. Intellectual aspects again play a more prominent role in language learning. The seven-year-old is interested in the meaning and spelling of words. Many sevens use a picture dictionary, both as a specific tool and source book and as a fascinating volume for browsing in. Seven's approach to learning is primarily a serial, step-by-step process.

The eight-year-old, by contrast, shows a new capacity to grasp total wholes. He thrusts outward, ranging widely in new breadth of interests. He makes a more rational approach to foreign lands and peoples, and often shows surprisingly insightful empathy for social life in other cultures. Eight's verbal expansiveness too (loquacity, exaggeration, boasting, fabulizing) can find new outlet in a new language. His beginning use of code languages (Pig Latin, Double Dutch) suggests new potential motivations in language learning -- sharing secret knowledge with friends and mystification of enemies. Slang and cliches, prominent in his use of his own language, can add spice to another language.

The present trend toward providing opportunities for second-language learning in the early grades indicates a clearer recognition of the patterns and sequences of child development. The young child enjoys language experience. He is ready to learn, to listen, to communicate by word of mouth, in playful and dramatic situations. With favorable motivation he is emotionally amenable to a second and even a third language.

This holds true for nursery school and kindergarten age levels. But the new language experience should be introduced by a special teacher rather than a regular teacher. The give and take of language are so closely bound up with interpersonal relationships that even a mother may encounter resistance if too suddenly she addresses her child in a strange tongue. Second language learning whether at home or abroad is greatly influenced by emotional rapport and social factors.

In a culture which is at once monolingual and polyethnic, these factors are extraordinarily complex. They involve school administration (public and private), local community acceptance and parental cooperation. Nevertheless, it remains true that the generic child delights in language in all its phases, in mimics, in dance, in music and song, in dramatic expression, in activity games, and the spoken word. The early linguistic experience may be forgotten, but the second language, spoken and enacted, will make him aware of other peoples, broaden his outlook, and facilitate the intellectual acquisition of a second language at a later and higher level.